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TRANSFUSING THE LIFEBLOOD OF AN ARMY: COMBAT REPLACEMENTS
AND EFFECTIVENESS IN THE EUROPEAN THEATER OF OPERATIONS

By

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Fighting men are the one important commodity of which there is never enough and for which there is no acceptable substitute. --General Jacob L. Devers¹

Casualties are an unpleasant fact of combat. For a fighting force to retain its effectiveness, casualties require replacements. Those two ideas are deceptively simple to understand. The notion that men will die or receive wounds on the battlefield and require replacements seems so obvious that it nearly precludes deep, deliberate thought on the processes involved in providing necessary replacements. Moreover, the number of replacements anticipated for a given action must be sufficient to sustain the effectiveness of the fielded unit. Failure to adequately prepare and provide combat replacements can have devastating results. Unfortunately, the concerns for adequately providing reinforcements to a force conducting sustained combat operations appear to be lessons learned, shelved, and only reconsidered after they are needed again. In the European Theater of Operations (ETO) during World War II replacements proved to be the lifeblood of the fielded armies. The purpose of this paper is to highlight briefly a historiographical arc that demonstrates the combat effectiveness of U.S. forces in the ETO matched or exceeded the *Wehrmacht*, and that combat replacements proved to be a significant factor enabling United States performance. More specifically, U.S. military leadership was aware of the necessity for a mature combat replacement system, but did not act on it sufficiently until the final months of the war in Europe. The United States is again engaged in war, but the army appears not to have heeded the lessons provided at a high cost during the Second World War.

In some ways, the battles of World War II continue despite the fact that the shooting stopped almost sixty-five years ago. The struggles that endure do not take place on the battlefield. Rather, they exist today as a combination of intellectual and historical exercise.

Perhaps the question that creates the most consternation is explaining why the Allies won. In the ETO, discussing the war's outcome can be further narrowed to explaining why the Army of the United States defeated the German *Wehrmacht*. One version of the narrative is more an explanation of why the *Wehrmacht* lost, rather than how the U.S. won. According to this version, the *Wehrmacht*, no matter how well it may have performed on the battlefield, simply could not keep up with overwhelming technological, material, economic, and manpower resources the U.S. brought to bear in the ETO. In short, the more able man lost.

Martin van Creveld's *Fighting Power* and Trevor N. Dupuy's *A Genius for War* are two of the more well known works that give the *Wehrmacht* high marks, and suggest the war's outcome hinged on tremendous U.S. resources, and not on the relative fighting power of the combatants. Van Creveld argued the *Wehrmacht* was a "superb fighting organization," and in terms of "morale, élan, unit cohesion, and resilience, it probably had no equal among twentieth-century armies."² While the German army possessed a laser-like focus on operations, it did so at the expense of mechanization or a cumbersome administrative bureaucracy. "In other words," van Creveld argued, the German army "was built around the needs . . . of the individual fighting man."³ The German army, therefore, was simply a fighting machine, and one that fought well. On the other hand, Dupuy used a mathematical model for seventy-eight engagements in the ETO to support his claim of German performance. His pool of data included several different fighting postures, such as attack, defense, and delay. Dupuy found that his model showed the German army was 20 to 30 percent more effective than was their counterpart, even after accounting for Allied material advantages.⁴ One has to admit that the German army in the ETO was an effective, if not necessarily efficient force. Unfortunately, while both men seemed to have

proved the *Werhmacht's* superiority, neither of them was fully able to explain German defeat in any other terms than United States material advantage.

There exists, however, a body of scholarship that not only counters van Creveld and Dupuy, but also demonstrates the U.S. victory can be explained in other than material terms. Michael Doubler's *Closing With the Enemy* argues that the United States was able to adjust to the conditions of the battlefield much better than the Germans, and material advantage or not, U.S. soldiers compelled the Germans to surrender by defeating them on the field. Personnel administration and combat replacements were arguably the Americans' "greatest institutional blunder" during the war;⁵ however, the last months of combat witnessed a change in replacement policy that provided reasonably trained reinforcements, who moved to the front in ad hoc groups of varying sizes. Similarly, Peter Mansoor places the success of the U.S. Army on its ability to endure extended combat in *The GI Offensive in Europe*. The U.S. fielded only eighty-nine divisions, but was able to keep them properly manned. Combat replacements played a crucial role in that accomplishment. Indeed, "the United States was the only nation able to maintain its fighting forces near full strength throughout the war, a fact that greatly impressed German commanders."⁶

The final historical work considered most clearly highlights the importance of combat replacements. In answering the question regarding comparative combat performance of U.S. and German units, Robert Rush's *Hell in Hürtgen Forest* demonstrates that, despite losing 86 percent of its authorized strength (and over 100 percent in the frontline infantry companies); the 22nd Infantry Regiment remained an effective, cohesive force much longer than did their opponent. The steady flow of U.S. combat replacements ensured the 22nd never dipped below 75 percent strength. Additionally, those replacements, while often lacking combat experience, were not

green recruits, but junior leaders and soldiers that had received anywhere between seventeen weeks and, in some cases, over a year of training. Theoretically, the 22nd should have been ineffective by the third day of combat.⁷ The 22nd Infantry battled on for fifteen more days, while their German counterparts' efficiency and cohesion crumbled. Germany essentially ground its units to a nub, and then consolidated what was left with other similarly mauled formations to create ad hoc units that were reinserted into the frontline.

It is unfortunate that the importance of replacements and the maturation of the replacement process appear to be a revelation borne of contemporary experience. While the United States experienced casualties at an unprecedented rate during World War II, it did not enter the war completely devoid of the knowledge of manning a combat force for sustained, expeditionary combat. In May 1941 Major General Fox Conner, who worked as an operations officer for General John Pershing in the American Expeditionary Force (AEF) in World War I and served as a mentor to future generals such as Dwight Eisenhower, George Marshall, and George Patton, wrote a brief article in *Infantry Journal* clearly defining the importance of providing replacements based on his experiences with the AEF in WWI. Conner argued “no single item of military organization is more important than the provision for adequate replacements...” and “without adequate replacements an army melts away to an inefficient skeleton.”⁸ Conner was clear in his assessment that failure to maintain manpower would lead to failure on the battlefield.

Conner proposed three “fundamentals” of a successful replacement program that post-WWII assessments of the wartime replacement system appeared to validate. First, a unit will require the majority of replacements after its first battle. Second, replacements in an amount greater than the number of casualties actually sustained are necessary to facilitate soldiers

returning to their original units. Third, a unit can sustain its morale with losses as high as fifty percent given the immediate replacement of its losses.⁹ While Conner may have aimed too low regarding the percentage of casualties a unit can sustain and remain effective, the premise remained sound that successful replacement operations can sustain morale even with extreme losses—as proven by the 22d Infantry in the Hürtgen. While not one of the three fundamentals, Conner’s most nuanced suggestion was that even replacements suffer losses before entering combat through what is today known as Disease and Non-battle Injury (DNBI). Put another way, even replacements require replacements. Conner’s ultimate recommendation to provide adequate replacements was to assign a man to a replacement center for each soldier assigned to a combat division, with 75 percent of all replacements being infantrymen.¹⁰

Conner’s article stands out not only for its prescient assessment of replacement of requirements, but also as it was the only article regarding replacements published during the war in *Infantry Journal*, *Cavalry Journal*, or *Military Review*. In the half-decade following the war, however, several articles appeared in *Infantry Journal* and *Military Review* assessing the army’s combat replacement system.¹¹ Several themes emerged, and perhaps the two most significant were that training, specifically small unit training, should be a part of a replacement’s progression through the system at all levels right up until joining the unit in the line; and, replacements should move in units as opposed to the individual replacement system used for the majority of the war.

While current U.S. Army policy provides for training replacements to ensure soldier proficiency, amazingly the army still uses the Individual Replacement System identified as insufficient from the evidence acquired in the ETO. The length of the current U.S. conflict is more than double that of World War II. Fortunately, the total casualties sustained during the entire war to date are less than the worst months of WWII. At the same time, the army must not

be lulled into a sense of security regarding its replacement policies simply because it has not been called on to implement replacement operations on a large scale. Most recently in 2008, Colonel Patrick Rice, a senior army personnel officer, called for the creation of a small unit replacement system in lieu of the still current individual replacement system as a means of best maximizing the combat effectiveness of its units.¹² Historical example and historiographical assessment support not only Rice's recommendations, but also that effective combat replacement operations do indeed provide the essential element, the lifeblood of fighting armies—its people.

Victory is the ultimate measure of success on the battlefield. The German army in the ETO was undoubtedly a fine military organization. One of its greatest weaknesses, like its World War I predecessor, was that it could not assist in translating operational and tactical success into strategic victory. Furthermore, the German army failed to learn, adapt, and make the administrative changes necessary to maintain their initial edge over the U.S. Army. The U.S. army that held the field in May 1945 was not only superior to the U.S. Army of 1942, it was also superior to its German opponent. Van Creveld claimed that the American personnel system was “perhaps more than any other single factor. . . responsible for the weaknesses displayed by the U.S. Army during World War II.”¹³ On the contrary, it seems among the many adjustments U.S. forces made in tactics, techniques and procedures, their personnel replacement policies proved to be effective, if not entirely efficient. The U.S. sustained the manpower of its army and won. The *Wehrmacht* never adequately adjusted, and lost. That is not to say that the modern U.S. Army is following the path of the *Wehrmacht*; rather, it is a reminder that battlefield success often hinges on overlooked policies and practices. The luxury of not having to implement large-scale replacement operations should not lull the U.S. Army into being unprepared to do so should the need arise.

¹ Quoted in John R. McLean, “Personnel Losses,” 62.

² Van Creveld, *Fighting Power*, 163.

³ Ibid., 165.

⁴ Dupuy, *Genius for War*, esp. Appendix E.

⁵ Doubler, *Closing With the Enemy*, 288.

⁶ Mansoor, *The GI Offensive*, 255.

⁷ Rush, *Hell in Hürtgen*, 304, 307, 338, 343.

⁸ Conner, "Replacements," 2, 3.

⁹ Ibid., 4.

¹⁰ Ibid., 9.

¹¹ Elbridge Colby, "Replacements for a Field Army in Combat," *Infantry Journal* 60 (March 1947): 12-18; Carl L. Elver, "The Evolution of the Replacement System," *Military Review* XXVII, no. 4 (July 1947): 23-28; idem, "Theater Replacement Systems of World War II," *Military Review* XVII, no. 5 (August 1947); John R. McLean, "Personnel Losses and Replacement Requirements," *Military Review* XXIX, no. 5 (August 1949): 63-62; and n.a., "Battle Casualties," *Infantry Journal* (September 1949): 18-26. It is telling that *Cavalry Journal* (later *Armor and Cavalry Journal*) did not have any articles regarding personnel in the first dozen years after WWII. Infantrymen sustained nearly 80 percent of all combat casualties during the war, and as a result appeared more concerned with the idea of combat replacements.

¹² Rice, "Transforming the Army's Wartime Replacement System," *passim*.

¹³ Van Creveld, *Fighting Power*, 79.

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